

VOICES & VISIONS

SECTION B

*Southeast Conference Edition
United Church News*

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What Are We Without Hope?

By Jennifer Spears

It is so easy in the “hurly-burly” of modern life to lose sight of what is important. One constant, though, that always seem to crop up is the principle of being your brother’s keeper. Human beings, as a group, no matter their faith, place a great deal of importance on the lives of others. Witness the group of strangers who risk their lives to save a drowning child, and sometimes die themselves. Witness the person who throws themselves in front of a car to save someone or pulls a stranger off a street as they are about to step into unseen traffic. Witness the parent who runs into a burning house to save a child and sometimes dies. Witness those who, even today, are martyred for their faith.

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From the Conference Minister

Dear Friends,

It is a God thing, I suppose... some months ago we the Conference staff assigned a theme to each newsletter for the year, and this newsletter was to be lifting the theme



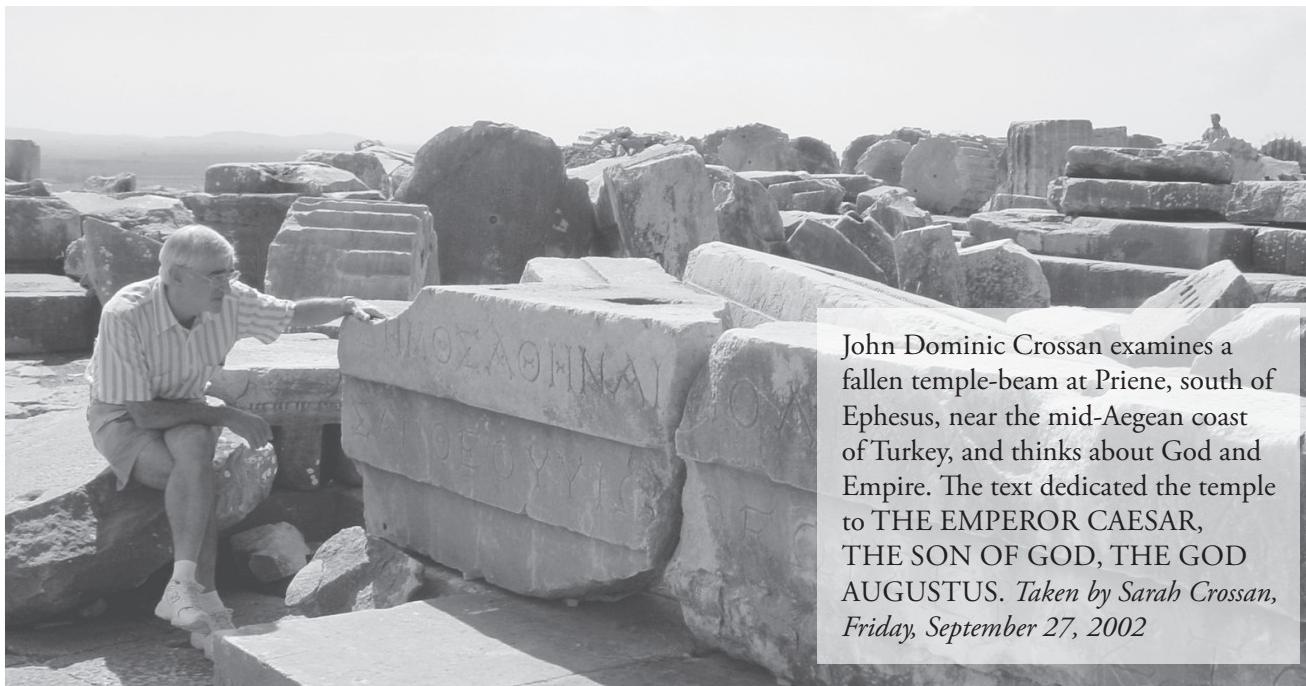
"hope". I returned this week from a visit to the Cathedral of Hope in Dallas, a congregation of 2500 that describes itself as "the world's largest liberal Christian church with a primary outreach to GLBT people". Founded in 1970 in the midst of the AIDS crisis by 12 friends, they even then, described themselves as a "cathedral", and in spite of the prevalence of death and disease, a people "of Hope".

In the Letter to the Hebrews the author writes, "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for...", that is, faith is driven by, is undergirded by hope. The Apostle Paul writes to the church in Corinth the familiar words "faith, hope and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love". Without hope, faith flags, without hope, love wanes. Hope may be intangible, but just as the wind, it is felt, it does have the power to move. When we commit to our life partner with the words "I promise to love...you... from this day forward in sickness and in health, in plenty and in want... until death shall part us", we are saying "the power of hope will sustain this love through the inevitable 'stuff' of life". When our children are baptized and we commit to "encourage this child to renounce the powers of evil and to receive the freedom of new life in Christ", again, we dare to hope that our love and the love of God will sustain and nourish this fragile new life into adulthood in spite of all odds. Hope lifts us above both the monotony and terror that mark our lives. Through hope the glory of what God intends shines through us, these "earthen vessels".

Early in my conference ministry here with you a pastor confided in me that the Southeast Conference was a "sinking ship", an opinion I knew was not his alone. I preached a sermon in response calling us to move from being "pitiful to powerful", to dare to live out of a death defying hope. I believe that just as a circle of 12 visionary friends lived into becoming a "Cathedral", this conference is on a journey the pathway of which is lit by the hope we know in Christ Jesus, from whose love nothing can separate us, "neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities... or nor powers, nor height, nor depth...".

Peace to You,
Tim Downs

Conference Minister



John Dominic Crossan examines a fallen temple-beam at Priene, south of Ephesus, near the mid-Aegean coast of Turkey, and thinks about God and Empire. The text dedicated the temple to THE EMPEROR CAESAR, THE SON OF GOD, THE GOD AUGUSTUS. Taken by Sarah Crossan, Friday, September 27, 2002

John Dominic Crossan to Speak on God and Empire

New Testament scholar John Dominic Crossan will be speaking at the Pleasant Hill Community Church, UCC, on April 11th-13th on the topic *God and Empire*. Crossan will present four lectures based on his recent book *God and Empire: Jesus Against Rome, Then and Now*.

This event, sponsored by the Shalom Center for Continuing Education, will begin Friday evening at 7:00pm with a lecture on "Civilization and Empire." The program continues Saturday morning at 9:00am with two lectures entitled "The Bible and Power" and "Jesus and God." The lecture series concludes Saturday afternoon at 1:30pm with Crossan speaking on "Apocalypse and Violence." Crossan will remain in Pleasant Hill, delivering the sermon during Sunday morning worship at 10:45am.

John Dominic Crossan was born in Nenagh, Co. Tipperary, Ireland, in 1934. He was educated in Ireland and the United States, received a Doctorate of Divinity from Maynooth College, Ireland, in 1959, and did post-doctoral research at the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome from 1959 to 1961 and at the École Biblique in Jerusalem from 1965 to 1967. He was a member of a thirteenth-century Roman Catholic religious order, the Servites (*Ordo Servorum Mariae*), from 1950 to 1969 and an ordained priest from 1957 to 1969. He joined DePaul University, Chicago, in 1969 and remained there until 1995. He is now a Professor Emeritus in its Department of Religious Studies.

He was Co-Chair of the Jesus Seminar from 1985 to 1996 as it met in twice-annual meetings to debate

the historicity of the life of Jesus in the gospels. He was Chair of the Parables Seminar in 1972-76, Editor of *Semeia. An Experimental Journal for Biblical Criticism* in 1980-86, and Chair of the Historical Jesus Section in 1993-1998, within the Society of Biblical Literature, an international scholarly association for biblical study based in the United States.

In the last thirty-five years he has written twenty-three books on the historical Jesus, earliest Christianity, and the historical Paul. Five of them have been national religious bestsellers for a combined total of twenty-four months. The scholarly core of his work is the trilogy from *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (1991) through *The Birth of Christianity: Discovering What Happened in the Years Immediately After the Execution of Jesus* (1998), to *In Search of Paul: How Jesus's Apostle Opposed Rome's Empire with God's Kingdom*, co-authored with the archaeologist Jonathan L. Reed (2004). His next book, *God & Empire, Jesus Against Rome Then and Now*, will be published by HarperSanFrancisco in February 2007. His work has also been translated into eleven foreign languages, including Korean, Chinese, and Japanese.

The event in Pleasant Hill is free and open to the public, with a small cost for Saturday lunch. For more information related to the program and lodging availability call Jennifer Young at the Pleasant Hill Community Church at (931)-277-3193 or sign-up through the Pleasant Hill Community Church website at www.pleasanthillucc.org

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Hope. • • • • •

What makes them do this?

The three words at the very core of Christian belief seem to be the reason anyone would do this, the principles of **faith, hope and charity**. What is one without the other? But take away someone's hope, and their faith and love suffer greatly; without that underlying hope in God's perfect love that passeth all understanding, a person will begin to shrivel and die inside.

There are so many references to "hope" throughout the Bible that a person very quickly sees it permeates all 66 books; and as Christians, we of course take great comfort from the words found there. We find our moral compass in these three principles. But we also have to put these concepts into practical application. How we go about doing that can be the real acid test. What I have witnessed since becoming a member of the United Church of Christ has shown me the true power of Jesus as Savior. It wasn't so long ago, during my 40s, that I felt I had lost hope. The Jesus I knew when I accepted him as Savior at the age of 9 was not the one who was being held up to me as an adult. Certain issues in my life had caused me to question how Christianity was being preached and practiced where I was concerned. I didn't know how or where to look to rediscover the living, breathing Jesus, the one who was the epitome of hope. When I found the UCC, my life began to reorder itself in what to me was the proper manner. I put Jesus back at the apex of my life, and once more made him the one around whom, my being revolved. I once again had the certainty that I was living my life with faith, hope and charity. The way I could best be as a living example of Christian life was to spread this message to anyone who needed it; what anyone did with my offering was up to them. But I did my best to show the face of love, of compassion, to anyone. I did my best giving hope, as I had once been given hope — when I felt I had none.

I have very recently witnessed someone lose their hope. They were shattered by the indignity of being turned away at a doctor's office due to an unpaid bill and no insurance. This person suffers from conditions quite possibly life-threatening. I have seen this very same person have their hope restored in short order by the intervention of a church she attends, a church that pays her bill so she may attain the medical care she so desperately needs. People who are dying of AIDS have had their hope maintained and restored because their church gathers them into its loving arms and tells them, by its actions, that they are loved and valued by the church of Jesus Christ. They may help by buying medication, with prayers, by offering a shoulder to lean on or lending an ear to listen. I have seen someone with their heart ripped in two by the sudden and shattering end of a long term relationship. This person finds their hope again through the intervention of loving friends who, no questions asked, take them in and care for them, regardless of the cost.

The mind-altering and numbing effects of illegal drugs and alcohol can lead humans to plumb the very worst depths of their souls. I have seen them be rescued from this life in hell and regain their hope in life

Cover Story Cont'd.

through the purity of God's love and salvation through Jesus. I have witnessed a Christian who by taking small stumbling steps back into the church totally restored by Jesus' direct intervention. This one-on-one personal experience fanned the small embers of their hope into a blazing fire.

An example of hope that shines down the years is witnessing a spouse stand beside their mate at a crucial time. Hearing that the person they have known and loved for almost 2 decades must figuratively die to become someone different would be enough to leach away anyone's hope. But their hope — that the spouse undergoing this life-altering change would be a better person — enables the person changing to find the courage to do so. Believing in their hearts that God has truly placed them together in the first place, this newest crucible enlarges and enriches the hope of both. Being a professional journalist by trade, I have witnessed many things in a career spanning three decades. I have seen the worst of humans, but also the best. I have cried over children lost in a wintertime fire; their mother left them alone and sleeping when a heater sparked a fire that consumed their home. My hope was severely damaged due to this mother's inattention at one crucial moment. I know now, though, that those three young children rest in the arms of Jesus. My hope of his perfect love gives me the surety of this. The very bottom of someone losing hope is when a person commits suicide. They see no way out, and no way to change anything. Unfortunately, even if they succeed, Jesus was there. They just couldn't see him with their clouded eyes.

One incident over the years that continues to haunt me took place in the winter of 1988. A homeless man living in the subway stations in Philadelphia was being evicted from his makeshift home. He was shuffling away with head hung, clothes filthy and tattered. You knew, from looking at the picture, he had not only lost what little he had in the world, he had lost all remaining hope. In the background, subway authorities were dismantling and confiscating his possessions. The shock and dismay I felt over that one picture has resonated through the years. I thought to myself, "It might be legal, but it's not right." That is something I feel very strongly about, and of which I am absolutely sure. Taking away someone's hope is never right. They can be destroyed.

We as Christians need to always be aware of the danger of taking away hope through careless words or deeds. We must instead, through our actions, instill hope. As we grow older, we find that the very act of living teaches us about hope — how it can be gained, how it can be lost, how it can be restored, how it can be shared. For us as Christians, we know the hope of life eternal is part of the bedrock of our belief. So as we approach Easter, the most holy time of the year, we remember the sacrifice and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, which gives us and guarantees us that hope eternal, both in this life and the next.

Jennifer Spears is a member of the board of trustees at Garden of Grace UCC, Columbia, SC. and a TAP Coordinator and participant

AROUND THE CONFERENCE:

New from Local Congregations

We are honored that two of our newer congregations are featured in the promotional materials for the upcoming all church Strengthen the Church offering. They are **Garden of Grace United Church of Christ**, Columbia, SC and **Kirkwood United Church of Christ**, in the Atlanta area. Both are thriving congregations with dynamic leadership, Kirkwood UCC is worshipping at 50 people after its first month.

Piedmont College announces a symposium February 22-23 at their Athens, GA, campus, titled "**The Bible in the 'Christ-haunted' South**". Registration materials are at www.piedmont.edu. Featured presenter is the renowned **Barbara Brown Taylor**. The two day symposium will also feature workshops on biblical influences in art, music and literature, led by Piedmont faculty. Registration is \$100.00.

Pleasant Hill Community UCC, TN will be hosting the noted New Testament scholar **John Dominic Crossan, April 11-13**, sponsored by the Shalom Center for Continuing Education. Free of charge, registration is required. Register on the church web site: www.pleasanthillucctn.org.

On November 4th 2007 **First Congregational UCC, Montgomery, AL** celebrated the retiring of their mortgage and the dedication of a "Wall of Ministers", a pictorial and factual account of the congregation's twenty-two ministers from its founding in 1892 to the present. They took the occasion to dedicate the church library to **Essie Buskey** naming it in her honor.

Pilgrim Congregational United Church of Christ, Birmingham, AL celebrated its last worship service in its beloved blue roof church on December 20th, 2007, following their sale of the building. Led by their pastor **Bud Precise** through a process of discernment and renewal that included selling their facilities and visioning a new future, the congregation will be worshipping at a Baptist church as they prepare for the next steps in their lives together.

Peace Congregational United Church of Christ, Clemson, SC led by **Susie Smith**, has in its first month grown to 40 people in worship.

Pilgrim Congregational UCC, Chattanooga, TN will welcome **David Brown** as its new pastor February 1st. David will be installed on March 2nd at 4:00 p.m. The preacher for the service will be the author Lloyd Rediger.

Tom Warren, pastor of **Pleasant Hill Community UCC, TN** will be on sabbatical this summer. In his absence, **Jack Seville** will be serving as interim minister. Jack has served numerous interims, most recently, as interim conference minister in the Ohio Conference.

Central Congregational UCC, Atlanta, is beginning their search for a new senior pastor. Please contact Tim Downs for further details, and if you have interest in the position. They are currently being served by Phil Price as interim pastor.

Church of the Savior, Knoxville, TN is seeking a half time associate minister for family, children and youth. Contact Tim Downs for further details if you have interest.

concerns & celebrations

sharing THE Word

We were saddened by the news of the death of **Bennie Liggins'** mother on November 14th. Bennie is the pastor of **Unity United Church of Christ in Montgomery, AL**, and former Associate Conference Minister for Evangelism and New Church Development for the Southeast Conference.

Arnold Slater, pastor emeritus of **Pilgrim Congregational United Church of Christ in Chattanooga, TN** celebrated his 102nd birthday on December 2nd. He preached at Pilgrim Congregational UCC on that occasion. Arnold was the first moderator of the Southeast Conference following its organization in 1966.

Roy Bain, pastor of the **Congregational Christian Church Lanett, AL**, has now recuperated from surgery.

Kathy Robinson Nelson, Pastor of **Plymouth Congregational United Church of Christ, Charleston, SC**, suffered a fire at her home December 7th which destroyed all of its contents. No one was harmed.

We are pleased to announce the marriage of **Rodney Franklin**, pastor of **First Congregational Christian United Church of Christ, Birmingham, AL**, and Angela Balfour; who were united at a service in Connecticut. First Church, Birmingham, celebrated the occasion at a reception on January 12th.

As you know, **Will Rabert** announced his retirement from the position of Disaster Response Coordinator for the Southeast Conference in June, 2007. We are pleased to report that his successors have been named: **Larry Calbert, pastor of Rush Memorial Congregational**

United Church of Christ, Atlanta, GA, will cover Georgia and South Carolina, **Bob and Connie Waidmann, members of Pleasant Hill Community United Church of Christ**, were assigned to Tennessee, and **Angie Wright**, pastor of **Beloved Community United Church of Christ, Birmingham, AL**, is responsible for Alabama. Having been trained by Will, they will receive further training from the national staff this spring.

We are pleased to report that **Susie Smith**, previously pastor of United Christian Church in the Philadelphia Association of the Penn Southeast Conference was granted ministerial standing in the Georgia South Carolina Association, and was installed December 9th, as pastor of **Peace Congregational United Church of Christ, in Clemson, SC**; one of the newest church starts of the Southeast Conference. Peace Congregational UCC is worshipping in University Lutheran Church (ELCA) in Clemson.

TJ McGiffert, a member of **Central Congregational United Church of Christ, Atlanta, GA**, has announced his service of installation will be held on March 5th, as chaplain on staff at DeKalb Medical Center, **Decatur, GA**.

Steve Sterner, newly elected Executive Minister of Local Church Ministries of the United Church of Christ, has joined **Central Congregational Church of Christ, Atlanta, GA**. He and his wife Judy are attending **Peace Congregational United Church of Christ in Clemson, SC**, near their new home.

I Hope You'll Dance

Written by Rev. Cameron Trimble

The other day as I was driving through the hills of our great conference going from one church to another, a song came on the radio which I had not heard for a few years. You may know this song — even if you are not a country-music fan — it swept the country about five years ago and was sung at every high school graduation ceremony in 2001. It was Lee Ann Womack singing "I Hope You'll Dance."

*I hope you never lose you sense of wonder,
You get your fill to eat but always keep that hunger,
May you never take one single breath for granted,
God forbid love ever leaves you empty handed.
I hope you still feel small when you stand beside the
ocean,
whenever one door closes I hope one more opens.
promise me that you'll give faith a fight's chance,
And when you get the choice to sit it out or dance...*

I hope you dance.

I hope you dance!

What does it mean to "dance" in your life? What amazing, beautiful music is the world playing for you? Is it a tango? Or a waltz? Or maybe break-dancing? In my life, I think it is the "chicken dance".

This past year has been very, very busy. I don't know about you, but I let life get a bit out of control this spring. We have now started four new churches around the conference. We have two new Comma Connections. Many of our existing churches are growing in exciting ways that require new visioning and planning for the future. Some of our churches are declining and looking for ways to "do a new thing." We are working on our conference capital campaign, updating our use of technology and building collegial relationships throughout the denomination. What an amazing year so far! We have done some good work together — I hope you think so.

But I also learned some important lessons (that apparently I have to keep learning until I get it right!). I learned that I can sometime over-do and over-commit. I learned that I am a better pastor to our churches when I am a better partner and mother to my family. I learned that I am more creative when I turn the computer off, and less stressed if I don't watch the news at night. I learned that talking on the phone is often more fun than typing an email (but I am not giving email up!). I learned that working with people you like, doing a job you love, is better than almost anything else in the world. In other words, I learned that "dancing" for me has a lot to do with pace, rhythm, harmony and accompaniment.

As we head into 2008, life's rhythm is picking up pace again. But this season, I am going to take the time to watch the plants bloom as I am driving to your church for our next visioning meeting. I am going to call just to check in — with no particular reason in mind — so that we stay connected in this wonderful, crazy calling of ministry. I am going to read more books, drink more water, swim more laps and sing in my car.

And in the midst of it all — I am going to DANCE! Will you join me?

suggested reading

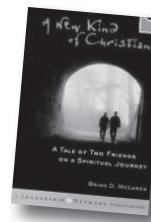
Unbinding Your Church (Pastor's Guide to the Real Life Evangelism Series) — by Martha Grace Reese.

Published in 2008 by Chalice Press, Atlanta, GA. This is the second book in a three-book series by Rev. Martha Grace Reese. In this book, Rev. Reese provides a basic "how-to" strategy for pastors and leaders to help their congregations talk about their faith and church with their friends and family. We recommend that you read these books sequentially.

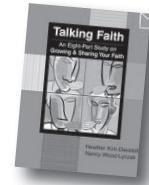


practices: prayer-conversation with God; and evangelism-conversation with others, especially those who are not part of a faith community.

A New Kind of Christian: A Tale of Two Friends on a Spiritual Journey — by Brian D. McLaren. Published in 2001 by Jossey-Bass, Inc., A John Wiley & Son, Inc., New York, NY. McLaren, pastor and author of *The Church on the Other Side*, proposes that postmodernism is the road to take in order to move on from the current stalemate between conservative evangelical and liberal Christians. Here he has adopted the fictional tale of an earnest, very conservative pastor who has become so burned out in his church life that he is planning to quit the pastorate. Instead, he makes friends with his daughter's science teacher, who leads him to an enthusiastic embracing of postmodernism as applied to the Christian message.



For additional information on any articles or activities, contact Tim Downs at tdowns@secucc.org or call the conference office at (404) 607-1993, or outside the Atlanta area at (800) 807-1993.



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